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Annual ministerial review: implementing the internationally agreed goals and commitments in regard to gender equality and empowerment of women

Statement submitted by Association for World Education, a non-governmental organization in consultative status with the Economic and Social Council

The Secretary-General has received the following statement, which is being circulated in accordance with paragraphs 30 and 31 of Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

* E/2010/100.

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Statement

The institutions that provide the model for the programmes of Association for World Education are the folk high schools of Scandinavia. This vibrant network of hundreds of non-formal, residential, secondary and post-secondary schools all over Scandinavia first developed in the mid-nineteenth century in rural Denmark and spread soon after to the rest of Scandinavia. They were founded on the thinking of Danish theologian, philosopher and educator N. F. S. Grundtvig, who believed that the key to social and economic development and to the development of democracy lay in the "enlightenment of the people". This concept is one we can compare to the current notion of "consciousness-raising", with a strong social and philosophical base. The movement focused on literacy for rural farm populations; soon enough it became part of the broader, radical new notion of education for the general population which was spreading through Europe, namely education in the native language of the people (as opposed to elitist Latin).

And how can the enlightenment of the people help to promote gender equality when access to education itself is most limited? In many societies and contexts, the informal setting of adult education, learning circles and small gatherings is as good or better an environment for achieving this type of teaching for social change than the formal educational system (where there is one). Formal education systems can and must present the big picture, codify, convey statistics and measure outcomes, but the informal context of conversation among equals, of teachers sharing experiences with learners, even teachers and learners exchanging roles, can provide the basis for change to be enacted in society through relationships.

Historically, the great teachers shared the common belief that teaching was about relationships, and for that reason, the stronger the relationship in which teaching was grounded, the more effective the teaching.

While it is true that the fight for gender equality still needs to be won in most societies, developed and developing, and at many levels — within professions, in government, in business, in education — it is also true that meaningful social change on a broad scale lies in changed thinking. Equality clearly does not mean identical social roles, or identical roles from one society to another. Adult non-formal education programmes can lead the way.